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Many of these poems are set in the landscape of the South. They center on the appetite—for sex, violence, tribal vengeance. These poems aim to look at the experience of the Southerner. The journalist Marshall Frady wrote, “The Southerner always tended to believe with his blood rather than his intellect.” These poems are about those who believe with their blood.

IF THE CREEK DON'T RISE

by

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Dangerous Carpentry: If a new window is cut in an old house some member of the family will die. . . . This is especially true if you saw out the new window and let the sawed boards fall inside the house, although bad luck may be turned aside by throwing your apron through the window and jumping out after it. This same idea of death also applies to cutting a new door in the house, especially if the old doorway is closed up. In fact, adding any new part to an old house (or garden) will cause death, it being considered 'a sin' to use new lumber on old dwellings.

— *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, by Newbell Niles Puckett

To A Burning House

Let's begin: Knock over the kerosene lamp, the flame spilling
onto the deck of cards from the late-night
poker game

The queen of hearts' face curls into itself
to meet her twin The jack's twisted grin
dissolves into smoke

See the flame swallow the overturned chair and wrap its tongue
around the leg of the divan

See the flame as it sails up the lace curtain like a man's hand reaching
up the folds of a dress, the length
of a woman's inner thigh

The flames creep like foxes
across the house

Quickly the parlor ignites Its feminine things submitting
easily to the appetite

Now the flame has a chest, beats faster, now surer

Now, flame, you have *will* Rise

Now, flame lick across the wallpaper, releasing the roses
that have held their bloom stained
into the wall and waiting all these years

Now, flame burst the glass of the old photographs
freeing them of their frames
Good-bye to the mustached men, their deliberate gazes!
Good-bye to the portrait of the brothers flanking the prized peacock,
the plumage untranslatable
in black and white

Now, flame, climb the stair in a single stroke
eating it up floor by floor
Hear the groan of dry pine

Burn the haunts out of this house
Burn boundless

You, insatiate Stride through the hall
Run your arms around
this Victorian frame Wreck it

Take the bookshelves—all, take them all—
the passages someone committed to memory, the red
maple leaves buried between the pages Burn
like Achilles across the battlefield

Now, flame, blaze through the bedroom Feverish sheets,
the down pillows Send the burst of feathers burning
through the windows and into the night

Flame, thread your fingers through me Great God,
there are acres of me to burn
Reach higher, rise
to the reddening sky

until the last
wild exhalation The cooling
ash, the smoke and sigh

Twelve Ghosts

Twelve ghosts in the house, and all of them you.
Caught like birds, in the stations of girlhood.

The first one in the dirt road pitches rocks
with her good strong arm, casting
further down the road and further still.

Another, the quieter sister, at the kitchen window
watches the one in the drive.

One kneels before the empty hearth
and sings her sister's name.
Up into the cool mouth of the chimney,

her echo climbs the chimney's throat, the voice shivers
its return.

Twelve ghosts. Each sister wears a different color ribbon
in her hair.

One sweeps all the rooms of the house.

Two stand before the mirror:
One shouts *lamb!*
The other whispers *tiger*.

But it's bad luck for two
or more to look into a mirror at the same time.
The youngest will die.

And what of the one in the basement?
No, we don't visit her.

Each daughter moves in the mood of a different month.
They carry the tides, the seasons, the year of you.
Each daughter, each dancer, an apostle
of the message of you.

All of them clapping together
the noon hour of you.

Someone forgot to whisper your death to the bees.
And so all the bees have left.
And the fruit trees have died.

Twelve ghosts, and all of them drink from one well.
Twelve, and each with her own room to haunt.

One opens her mother's drawer,
runs her fingers through the silk slips,
brings the slips to her cheek.

One plays a nocturne on the piano.

Another skips into the room,
strikes the discordant keys and vanishes.

Twelve white plates laid out at the table for supper.

Twelve ghosts, and all of them you.

One puts her ear to the dead wasp nest
and closes her eyes,

listens to the anguish that kicks
in the heart of the nest.

And the last fancies herself a rider of racehorses,
straddling the propane tank in the yard
and riding, reckless, riding.

It is Sunday, and I Wait for the Train to Pass

I can't recall when it was I lost my sense of taste;
maybe it faded over the years the way a cup of coffee grows cold

or left suddenly, while eating my wife's eggs before the morning *Star*.

We idle at the tracks in the pale blue pickup.
"Baby blue," my wife has told me. "The color of the truck is baby blue."

It's one of those heavy slow-assed freights.
The track's cross-signal light burns into my wife's face.

I taste nothing. Like a field, I guess, tastes nothing.
My mouth is a field.

This winter, like every, the blackbirds swarmed to our town by the thousands.
They flood the oaks in the square, sit restless in the branches and scream.

Yesterday at the Waffle House I saw the hunters.

I saw the backs of the hunters in a row at the counter
as they blew on their coffees,

just arrived from the morning fields, in orange caps and gray camouflage.

One pulled off his cap, wiped the sweat from his forehead
with a napkin, and examined it.

Another picked at the dead skin on his elbows.

My wife is wearing a shocking bright shade of lipstick.

In my mouth is the taste of a dead field.
My mouth, a field of fat dead birds.

The hunters lingered at the counter, the blood still warm on their boots.
The longer I looked, the more I hated them.

*And after, he wiped the blood off his blade
onto his pant leg, the one hunter who tasted the pleasure
of carrying over his shoulder the deer's massive thighs.*

Rider, Thrown from a Horse

When God took the South desert wind and created the Arabian, he said to him: "Thou shalt fly without wings and conquer without swords."

You had been warned.
And because none had ridden, they had not given the colt a name.
You chose him: the white blaze
across his face—with flanks
only a god could build.
The quiver of his haunches, the stamping hoof.
You, rider—approached the stall not masking
your intent to ride. The sky
smelled of coming rain. You
forced his mouth to take the bridle.
His fabulous, murderous eye
darkening.

You tightened the reins—an archer
stringing a bow—
and set forth, riding the one
muscle of the massive animal
beneath you.

Rider said to horse: *Set this field on fire.*

*This ride—the body of speed,
anatomy of a wave.*

*Who's to say what the minutes contain?
The stroke, the hand as it burns
up the wheel of the clock.*

In the air, a single arrow
in delicious flight—the rider and the ride.

You chose the field. You chose the horse.
Goddamn you, you chose the horse.

This Side of the Mountain

The horses knew the way
and at last we came down the mountain,
the three of us:

the father and his boy on the sorrel mare,
I on my Appaloosa, Big Man.
The sun hovered before our faces.

We could still smell the smoke
of the mountain, its remains
of char and rock and ash.

The father's slouch hat,
its broad brim cast
a shadow before the horses' path.

Crows climbed the sky
headed north toward
that which we had left.
They passed above
as black scarves in wind.

I heard only the hooves beat
the ground, slow and inevitable;
and the sound of Big Man
as he chewed his bit, the sweet
jangle of his silver bridle.

The father swept his hand over the land
in a single stroke, and told
his son the name that it once was.

This was no mountain.
It was the ghost of a mountain,
flayed, bald, blackened.
And we were not travelers returned,
but men descending
the face of a dead god.

I stepped down from the saddle
and dug my hand into
the boot-black earth, felt

the land not yet cool,
felt the land—our land—
condemned.

*This was all before my horse died,
and I left him, saddled.*

Headless Boy in the Battlefield

from a fragment of Archilochus

Your harsh mare faces the wind she moves against;
the soldiers left me in the field with you, staunching
my neck wound. My brother. My twin.
I know it's you by your dagger, your sharp penis,
You ate raw honey from the bees' nest and I, as usual,
watched the bees crawl on your lips. Beneath the pine I'll situate you;
I'll bury your head in the honeycomb, Melisseus will be sufficed.
When they hear the news, the women will hang their red sheets in the city.
Since you've died without a face, you're a kite. And therefore you imagine,
me running down the streets naked, calling your name, we establish beauty.

Mississippi Pastoral

August. Cotton's bloom
one wild white laugh
of field.

Listen: the sparrows
in the rail yard
build nests, one

finds a lady's
teacup on the tracks
and weaves hay in it.

August. In this land
things just happen
to be found. A turkey buzzard

in the sky spots
the fox's paws
he's waited for.

August. On the banks
of the Tallahatchie
the men take off their hats

to cool themselves.
They sweat
in black boots, and one hollars,

Here. We found the boy.

A seventy-five pound
cotton gin fan tied
with barbed wire

around the boy's neck.
August. One
wild white laugh.

Blackbird in the Open Field

My mother spoke less as the winter wore on.

Winter had settled into her knees, she said.
In the mornings she sat by the stove
and combed her long hair.
It was the first of January. I rose

early and took my father's shotgun. Only quail
and dove, my mother said. Your daddy
is too tired to drag back a deer.

The deep woods were so quiet. Leaves
fell through the branches.
I came to the field, bright and covered
with fresh snow.
The abandoned concrete pipes
still stood, stacked four rows high.
(In the summers I play here alone.)
I set down my gun,
blew the fog of my breath and listened.

I climbed to the top row, peered
into each of the pipes and said
my name and listened.
In the last pipe I found a boy, laid
with his feet together, hands
by his side as if he were fit into a canoe.
He wore a red wool cap.
I touched his mouth,
it felt like a dead bird fallen
out of its nest. He was perfect
except for a bruise on his chin.
I unlaced his boots
and took them off, uncovered the thin
socks that held the heavy little feet.
I put my boots over his feet and returned
home wearing his.

The next morning I visited him again,
I brought him a gray feather
covered in frost, and lay it over his lips.
Wind blew snow in, settling

over his open eyes
like a veil. His fine eyelashes
outlined in frost.
I listened. Blackbird,
I said, you are my new brother
and I will sing for you so
you won't feel alone.

I came to the boy in the field
every morning before school.
Sometimes I missed him so much
I'd go in the middle of the night
to my mother's tall mirror
and there I saw him, standing
quiet where I stood.

My mother sat before the stove
as I put my boots by the fire to dry. She
looked at the boots, and stared into the fire
until her face burned on one side.
She said to me, Clear
the ice off the porch
so that Daddy doesn't slide.

In February my father and the men returned
from a hunt and hung the deer
from the oak, his hind legs spread,
hung upside down, the body
cooling, a stick propped between the ribs.
The deer hung for days in the tree.

After, the men sat on the porch
with my father for supper. They sang late
into the night and howled. My father
handed me a piece of backstrap wrapped
in bacon. He put his hand over
my face and looked in my eyes and laughed,
my eyes showing between the cage of his fingers.
His hand smelled of sweet feed.

The next morning I returned to my brother
in the white field, I followed
deep tracks from my porch through the woods,
but found him gone.

Blackbird, my brother, where have you flown?

Art Appreciation

1

Seventh grade. We fulfilled our humanities
requirement by sitting in that class. Her desk

was in front of mine. We began with the Greeks,
then Roman sculpture. She never spoke.

I only knew the back of her head, the severe
symmetry of cornrows and her soft

voice at roll-call. "Present."
When I came to class and found her desk empty

I felt a small cool gulf
where her body had resided.

Our teacher said we should remember her
in our prayers because of what her brother had done

that morning at breakfast when he grabbed a skillet
of boiling bacon grease and threw it in her face.

One boy whispered, "Them blacks
always tear each other apart like that."

2

After a month she returned to class. Her face
was a gesture of a face, like Michelangelo's

unfinished sculptures, where he worked inwards on a nude
figure; the head remained faceless, a marble block.

At roll-call our teacher said her name.
She responded, "Present."

From my desk I studied the back of her head in tight braids,
and the fine new hairs beginning

at the nape of her neck.

Blood Orange

(St. Mary's Asylum for Girls. Orphanage in Natchez, Mississippi.)

Freezing dark. I hear the others
drinking water with their hands.

Orange, a blood orange Maria
stole from a black man.

We share a bed. Beneath the covers Maria
is praying. Maria, I say, you are a dead opera

singer just laid in the dirt,
lips painted red, one eye

open. I pull open
the orange, say, Here Maria,

pretend you are eating the moon
and make a wish for a husband.

Say what your mama was—
a whore, say it. She was.

Whore, into the eleven o'clock bell.
Bells sound. The ripples of her cry—

yours, Maria
Maria your dark hair.

Ruby

After Buck Owens

I uncurl your fist as you sleep, Ruby.
Only sound is your breath. Quiet. An hour before dawn.
Here there is no room for the devil.
I open your hand and cover it with mine.
Will you let me follow, my love, when you're buried
beyond the sun's reach, beyond the dark brothers?

The preacher told it like thunder, "All my good brothers,
should the snake tempt you to taste his wet ruby
fruit, should the desire grasp hold within you, buried
so deep you can't pry it out, know this: God made dawn
for redemption. God whispered into this ear of mine:
'He who flies at night flies with the devil.'"

In my own dreams I battle with the devil.
Him and me could be brothers.
He leads me into a deep tunnel, down a pitch-dark mine,
guides my hand over an earth wall that spells your name, Ruby.
I touch this deep glow. Leave my hand to bear the heat. Dawn
be damned, I will remain here, buried.

I killed the old blue rooster, buried
his beak in the garden while you slept, before that devil
could wake to tell you it is dawn
here at last, here in the cold hills of Old Brothers
Mountain. I saved you the cock's comb, the fancy ruby
cap he prized. And the blades of his spurs are mine.

The men said I couldn't keep a wife restless as mine.
Making a wife of her, they said, is like trying to bury
the wind. Men said I couldn't hold you down, Ruby.
They said the flare of your cheeks marked where the devil
breathed his scarlet prayer. Men tore the lips off their own brothers
fighting for you, nothing but blood and hay left in the dawn.

Come the early light of the foggy mountain dawn
I've got my spade, heading to dig in the Brown Coal Mine.
I'll turn loose the horses from the barn, let go the brothers
to the cold springs to drink from water buried
deep in the ground, drink from the open hand of the devil.
I drank from his hand too, Ruby.

The devil's rosined bow begins to fiddle at dawn,
his brothers pick banjo. Your name I carved in the stump below mine.
Follow me, Ruby, I'll set you in the shade where the rooster's buried.

Web

He could baptize you with his poison.

Still, I headed down the hill toward his web
in the dark before morning,
and the dew on the grass felt good
and cool at my feet. The mist
breathed off the land.

At the hillside's end, spread in the mouth
of the vale, I found it: the spider's
web, lit with dew, each drop shone
in its amber glow
as if he'd netted sunlight.

He could baptize you with his poison,
or so it is said.

I was alone in the strange still palace
of his silver net.

Who was the architect
that threaded his home with beads
of honey, held
by the web's tender hold?
Would my touch disturb?

I climbed naked into his hammock spun
of honey. I drank
from the web. And my body
was no longer body, but one tongue
in the honey net. And I drank
with burning tongue of body,
tasted all—

exquisite in the quivering net.
The lean shadow of his leg
stretched across the land—at last
the black tenant of the hill.

I stood before him, a naked
child unmasked.

He stood, three
times my size, beheld me
with the black curtains of his eyes.
His mouth was hid. The spider
in his dark suit like a solitary noble.

The nightmare of his legs. He reached
to me, brought his hand
over my face. And slowly

another hand, and another, all his hands
over my body, through my hair, weaving.

Miguel

I aimed a rock at the back of the angel's head
and hit him. He fell.
That evening by the railroad tracks I'd found him.
He got himself tangled in the electric lines,
his left wing was burnt, awful smell in the air.
I bound his hands, put him in the back of my truck and drove home.
He was so light in my arms;
he has all the parts of a grown man, yet the size of a ten-year-old boy.
I opened a beer and watched him, waited
for him to come to, a thin gold dust
came off on my fingers from his wings, like a moth's.
A copper body, he was dark from flying in the sun, dark
like the Mexicans in our town. He could be
kin to one of them, come for a visit.
You are mine, I said. I will keep you.
His eyes opened. Like light
green pearls, kindled.
No pupils. Just a wide field of eye.
He messed on the floor. I got out the paper towels.
I chained him to the radiator, though he didn't try to escape.
He kept his wings tucked within, shy.
A week later I built a large cage and set him by the window.
He woke early every morning and looked out to the east.
He did nothing else all day but look out the window.
What is your name? I asked.
He looked up. His eyes held no expression.
I will call you Miguel.
Only once I saw his wings unfolded,
large as a buzzard's. He beat them in the air, and then was silent.
I've tried many foods but discovered he only likes honey.
As I fed him for the first time, I sang
Mama's little baby love shortnin, shortnin
Mama's little baby love shortnin bread.
Now he knows this tune; when I sing it he comes to the edge of his cage.
He eats honey from my hand
with his hot bronze tongue. After that first evening he ate honey
we did what we now do every time.
I went to him by the window.
We sat together and watched the evening come.

Interviews with the Dead

[Ghost #1]

Do you know what month it is?

Spring? Yes, surely it must be spring again.

But the month?

I sink into the coat sleeves of the man I loved.
I can smell him, whereas before I only imagined his smell.

Are you vengeful?

As a child, I wanted to commit my sins
in another girl's body.

Late afternoon the man's girlfriend arrives.

White panties are pulled
over her knees.

And my unseen hand between them.

—

[Ghost #2]

What do you miss most about being alive?

 Yesterday
I walked with a stranger, a woman
as she collected leaves beside the river,
and the last of the wildflowers.

You see, I've always been old.
 Even as a young girl.

What do you regret?

 Today
I follow the woman back to her apartment.

She lives alone.
She undresses,

puts on Maria Callas' *Carmen*,
sits on the sunlit floor.
Splits an orange with a small knife.
Tears back the skin of the orange.

She is naked but for her red scarf.

[Ghost #3]

Are you jealous of the living?

It is the gymnasium that I visit again and again.
I cannot help it.

The gymnasts in navy leotards
do splits.

It comforts me, the sound of the girls
on the wooden uneven bars.
The creak and moan.

What is it you want from the living?

The one I love best dips her hands into the chalk bowl,
claps them together, sending up a cloud of dust.

Her palms are worn raw from the bar.

But what of the living?

The little gymnast I love has a thin, severe mouth.
Her thighs, her thighs covered in chalk.

She turns to the bar,
 exhailes and leaps.

Still Life with Beijing Tiger

At the end of the workday
there they are, in the bedroom
curled together for the routine
nap before dinner.

The man, his arm draped
across his wife, inhales
the familiar scent of her
hair and is already dozing.
Beneath the weight of his arm
the woman can't sleep,
aware of the glow of the wristwatch
on her husband's hand.

Outside it is October again.
The late afternoon light
leaves sooner, the shadows
in the room larger, cooler.
She can feel the birds'
migration above
the house, imagines
the roof removed
the two of them observed below,
the beige bed sheets
strewn at their feet.

The day is done, the remains of light
swallowed into the increasing
night. The only sound
is the purr of the gray housecat
resting on its haunches
by the window, watching
the woman with its sullen
yellow eyes.

Husband

The hibiscus heaves out its tongue

a vulgar act for a yard plant

1.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are familiar. Our life together – our family a bundle of matches. A nice afternoon, except Jenny's just gotten her period and bleeds through her panties, and skirt. Tuesdays – on the bleachers, coaching – Ricky's teeth were thrown out of his face at the game but were repaired by Friday.

Debby was worried. Debby worries.

Sandy worries too. But the kids are good. They don't drink while driving fast.

They don't bring easy dates into our bed while we're out.

They are good kids. They too will have good kids.

2.

(Mondays, early
in the basement
before work before waffles smoke from the skillet
before wife begins
vacuuming the living room in white tennis shoes
her little dance across the carpet.

In unlit basement, I feel only
the wild whites of my eyes
and cock
at the edge of fever

without woman to even
give washcloths
without rubbers without routine
I cum so good my gums bleed.)

3.

The constant panting of lawn sprinklers. I can hear the others
mowing their lawns. I wait to mow mine.

4.

We put the dead deep into the ground. Perhaps it is cold, but they are dead.

5.

The summer we were fourteen, the neighborhood found a stray dog skinned. Our mothers all wondered which one of us – *name that child* whose hands possess monsters.

All us boys rang our hands in the dark. Not from the skinning, but from the remembered howl of the animal after we'd got him cornered.

6.

Saturday afternoon I swept dead flies from the windowsills.

7.

Sunday. Alone
in a womanless kitchen.

The slant of light from the window
on freshly mopped floors.

Towel on the counter still damp
from my wife wiping her hands.

Outside the window a green anole
halts, belly on the glass, gazes

at me with hooded stoic eye.
He flares that fierce red fan of his throat.

And seated at the table, I am surrounded
by the floral wallpaper hung here
for numberless years, the sun-faded vine

twisted with roses on the wall—the roses,
the ceaseless muscular mouths.

I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down

Alabama: Self-Portrait in Three Colors

Blue Prelude

Light descended with the tired motion of a man
taking down his hat as the funeral march passes.
It was an August of awful floods when the world took away light.
The people of my town walked around like crows, faces skyward.
Grasped for light as for the face of a mother.
Ferns sprung up with hunger,
Reek of gasoline in the river current.
Our river, she burned.
The peacock hollered his blue yodel beyond the black hills.
Don't mistake your hands for wings, someone told me.
The world had taken away light.
Is it punishment, the newspapers asked. We thought there was no god.
Forgive us, they pleaded. Whoever you are, forgive us.
The newspapers printed this as if god could read.
It was the third day.
The street windy, a glass soda bottle rolled down the road.
Leaves on the trees fattened, deepening into darkness with the minutes.
I could smell them, alive like meat.
Odor of blood on the hot asphalt.
The people of my town tore down a man with their bare hands,
They say he stole the light.
All a sudden I too asked the sky how come your hands left us.
How does the ocean feel about no light. How quiet is her bell.
My people, the drowned faces.
Barefoot, I feel the anger, the soil shiver.
The newspapers say even if you go stand up on a mountain,
Even there you can't feel the light.
A people, a piano, can't breathe.
My people lit into each other with hunger,
Gnawing for the light beneath the skin.
The world took away light. My people, their heartmuscle in a big flame lit.

Green

Alabama, 1989. Long hot summer.

Light throws a hard punch into my father's 35 mm camera,
While in June's high weeds the cicadas scream.
Photojournalist, the word for my father.

He bends down on one knee, adjusts the exposure,
Framing Ernest Mostella, an eighty-year-old black man,
The finest fiddler in these Alabama hills

Who carves his fiddles with a butcher knife, the strings
Made of cotton cord pulled tight by wooden keys.
Daddy photographs the fiddler, the glare of light

Against his dark eyes, the giant veins roped
Round his hands. The fiddler digs graves
By day, kicks the cemetery dirt

Off his boot soles before crossing over
The threshold of his front door. He says, Never
Enter a house with a shovel on your shoulder.

The fiddler laughs, standing on the front porch
Of his unpainted house, the slow sugar hum of his voice
Sounds like music to me, and I dance in the red dust

Of the sun, hopping on the hot stones.
And the fiddler laughs harder, howls,
His mouth making a deep bowl, a dark delight.

Alabama, 1987. River baptism.

Summer light is a cruel flat hand,
A slap across the eye.
We ride, windows down,

Lenses and film cartons on the truck floor.
My father and the reporters have covered the bombings
of Birmingham, the white dragons who terrorized Talladega.

Headed down a gravel road to the Tallapoosa River,
My father is on a bloodless assignment for a river baptism.

Sunlight dives through pines, washes the landscape.
At the Tallapoosa we hear the flutter of Christian voices.
Look out, my father says as I near step into a fat rattlesnake
Sunning herself in the warm dirt, her music humming.

My father stomps her, says I hate to kill
But this queen aint coming to the baptism.
The rattler is a bitter brass queen, but a dead queen.

With a pocket knife my father
Steals her beast-tail.
You can tell this one was a old queen, he says

Wiping the blood off of her stump, he gives it to me.
Her rattle, hear how heavy is her song.
He heaves her snake body up

Into an oak, where she hangs on a branch.
In my hand, her ancestral tail, the bloodpoison.
And I shake the rattle, hear her

Dead, still singing.

Alabama, 1985. You don't dance on a stranger's grave.

Pearl-like, the sky is mute
The morning of my great-grandmother's funeral.
Mama's quiet, still as a lake.

Her insides rollick
With the heat of grief.
Mama washes my feet, buttons me tight.

A gray veil of rain descends
As I follow Mama's shadow out of the house.
I'm in my Sunday shoes and white dress.

And beneath, my bare sex.
Smell of honeysuckle
In the rain.

Do you want to have a look at the dead lady, my cousin asks.
No, I don't want to see, but carry me

On your shoulders while you see.
It was a year of three deaths.
My mother, her insides would near not bear it.
After the burial, the rain let up.
My family ate outside, fried chicken and biscuit.
And I danced

A jig for my cousins, my kin.
Hear how sweet the sound on my feet.
I danced on a headstone, heelbeats onto someone's name.

The headstone said Pearl.

I took off my shoes, danced into her dusty grave.
Barefoot, I felt her blood beneath.
I danced on a black woman's grave and all a sudden she up

And slapped me across her grave, face aflame,
Cotton white teeth grinning.
My mother, her insides would near not bear it.

Unveiled, Mama's eyes.

Alabama, 2003. Here's how a hummingbird means bad death in Puerto Rico.

I held the light deeply the summer I returned
Home, smell of that state line crossing
From Georgia.

Aunt Marianna deadheads hibiscus from the vine on her porch.
Windows open, a hummingbird flies
Into the house, batters herself into the mirrors.

We turned off the ceiling fans and grasped
For hours at the flight
Of that green bird.

I caught her, her heartmuscle
Blasting big in my hands.
Near the hibiscus I release her in the sky.

Grandmama says that a bird trapped
In your house means death.

Grandmama, your black
Puerto Rican hoodoo.
Won't you tell me the story of our blood that lies

Beneath the skin
Of the land.
Let me eat off my skin,

Eat to the bad birthroot.

I am Alabama,
A green hummingbird lit
Into the light.

Red

The life you save may be your own.

Lightless. The sun sinking over Alabama.

Tell, what do you fear.

If I ate the orange it would be like eating the face of god.

When I was a girl I got letters from uncle Joshua from the Alabama State Penitentiary.

Sketches of angels; pencil on paper. His handwriting reaches to the sky to heaven.

What did he say. To be good. That there is a Jesus and a god.

He says he's fixing to go back to Jericho, to the farm to build his home on the lake.

Once me and him walked in the woods near Mama's house, his hands are white.

His hands trembling. I don't see any veins on him, not his arms nor his neck.

Mama says the shaking is because of the medication. Even his eyes, he's got shaky eyes.

Joshua looks up at the sky. I look at the ground. We are walking over a black mule's grave.

She was a mule called Sugar. You are an angel, uncle Josh says.

His hands are sad. He is not a free man.

Darlin, the birds in your tree

Aint singing.

Joshua, tattooed on his back is the weeping face of Jesus, his eyeballs raised in dark prayer.

Jesus face stained into his skin. Joshua, when he's rutting, the salt the sweat rolling

down his neck and back, sweat rolling tumbling down Jesus face

become the tears, the Jesus cry, his eyes

he look up look to the sky

for the god light.

Darlin, the birds in your tree

they's all dead.

I smell their dead song.

Tell, what do you fear.

Fear my skin will return to dirt.

My scars, back to nothing.

The scar's the place,

where a black horse bucked

you off, cutting your face

on a field stone.

Fear my skin, undone.

I'll be stone lonesome without

My skin.

And what of memory's music?

After god carries you, tell where does the saddest music go.

A wood fiddle, alone.

The notes, the bird, the taste

On the tongue of your mind.

Wood fiddle, don't you put me in the ground.

Don't trap me in no pine box,

I won't be buried in nobody's blood bowl.

Bury me standing

In the arms of a country oak.

Bury me as my father buried the snake

Stripped of her singing tail

High up in an old oak

Dead and high up.

Bury me in the sky

So that the god rolling

Across these eyes

Is light.

The Lightkeeper's Daughter

She knew this much: she was to conceive a child
by wading out into the river.

Waking in the deep
still night, the sweat beneath her breasts
soaking the nightgown, she was fearful, thought:

What if the current carried into me
the seed of one of the rivermen
relieving his lust
off the side of a flatboat.
Or if my child is fathered
by the Old Devil River himself?

Everyone said this was a jealous river
and grew angry if a man dared swim across it.

Or that the Mississippi never let go
of a man with his clothes on.

Here, in the lower river
where people never took their children
to get baptized, her father
kept the coal-oil lamp burning,
said: We must devote ourselves
to the light above.

After her father drowned
she repeated his words:
to keep the river light burning.

And every evening she climbed the lighthouse
to be that much nearer.

Scarlet Kite

Dawn. The fragile light
curls inside the spine
of a single leaf
rested on a child's eye.

*

Fog rolls over the pasture
into the windows of the home.
The woman on the front porch
at the dilapidated step smoking
a pipe is you.
The warm wood bowl
cradled in the gray hand.
Nothing moves
but the drift of smoke
from your nostrils, released
like breath from a horse in a frozen field.
And the hushed land before you:
the spent tires;
shards of mirror
in the muddy yard.

You imagine someday you'll uncover
her face in the ground. You've walked
all through the woodland
in worn boots while you called
to her, and smelled for any trace of her.
Day unwound into day.
The birds have memorized your call;
they repeat it to you, deliver it back in song.
And you, the broken spade.

You smoke on the front porch,
naked feet buried
in unlaced boots.
One more December has returned.
Your feet itch in the cold;
you take a nail clipper from your pocket,
clip your nails
and remember her

that morning in March, the land at the edge
of ripening season, a strong wind
through the dogwood buds,
branches waving at sky,
and there in the yard, your daughter builds a kite;
the freckled girl, the dark curls
around the crimson face, the sun's rays
burning through the dew of the first grass.
She casts her scarlet kite into the air,
the quick climb, the self-delighting flight,
the living breath that burnt within her
until the scarlet sail was caught
in the oak's branches, where it remains.

You empty the nails
into the pipe and smoke.
The barren field before you.
Your daughter, your flesh and bone.

*

Dawn unfolds; a bird
in the highest tree begins
to clean gray wings.

Wing and Light

I sit by the window with the blue velvet curtains
this morning, wearing my blue floral robe.

The brass horse figurines on the windowsill
have been here for years, facing out.

I watch the deaf girl on the sidewalk below.
She makes a mournful sound through her gloves.

Today is her birthday. The fresh snow
of last night her mother told was a gift.

The deaf birthday girl in her new red
wool beret and oh, her red scarf!

Her black hair tucked beneath the hat,
the black widow's peak revealed.

The birds are so loud this morning.
She must know it, she must.

The cat with the bell around its neck comes to her.
She removes her gloves to pet him. Those little bare hands.

She glides her finger over the layer of snow
on the unpainted picket fence in my front yard.

Up down, up down the peak.
Her brow furrowed with concentration.

The birds watch her from above.
Her cheeks fiery from the bright cold morning.

The downtown train passes, blasts its whistle,
all at once the birds flee from the tree.

The girl looks up, opens her mouth wide
and howls. The open palms she holds out to sky.

Woman with the Severed Arm

At dawn she leaves the house in her field coat.
The skinny dog on the porch follows.

The fog is thick but we know the way.

At the lake the dog will trail a scent along the bank.
The woman casts her line into the lake.

*I use my right hand to point to the sky. To a hawk or the crows pursuing.
The left hand was always the uncertain brother.*

As a girl she enjoyed the tasks that required both arms:
climb the sprawling oak to its highest branch,

capture the hummingbird in the house,
feel her beating in both hands, release her.

*The left arm was gone in the winter. The next summer I went every day to the lake.
I'd throw the key to the bottom. Dive down to find it.*

*

With men, as with putting the plates away, the woman measured her time.

Slow-dancing with a stranger, her right hand rests on his shoulder.

*The left hand, the ghost
touches the strange man's face.*

The left hand is want.

She brushes her hair before the mirror at night.
She parts her hair. Sleeps alone.

The blackbird's wings hang above my head.

*

The woman walks from the lake to the field.

The red horse waits at the edge of the field.

A man and a horse are brothers.

Either he'll take the apple from her hand or he won't.

The arm with the apple is all.

With only one arm, how could I also hold the bridle behind my back?

The woman is a weathervane.

Because she has only the one hand, she is not a deceiver.

I am not a deceiver.

When I am in the lake I am not on the shore.

The red horse watches the woman across the fence.

He'll take the apple from her hand or he won't.

I am not a deceiver. I have only the one hand. And it's open.

Good Morning Little School Girl

You left early this morning—
your panties on the line,
the broom still
setting on the front porch
and the front porch still
unswept. And you
heading down the road
barefoot, your blue
shoes in hand.
You pass the red mud fields
stirring jealousy up
among the fieldhands,
so they all watching each other's
eyes watching you.
And you just watching down the road.
Men say you a fine little mama
but surly as a colt.
Let me whisper
in your ear, tell you what
I'm going to do:
fly my crop duster
below the power lines
spray all the men
waiting for you.

Wheelchair in an Empty Room

An ashtray on the windowsill.

—

The bed by the window.

... and the wheel-
chair parked by the bed.

—

The hummingbird feeder outside the window—
red sugar water within the glass feeder.

And all this
lit by the sun at noon.

—

From wall to wall, the gray carpet—
disturbed by no foot.

Only the columns of wheels
from the vacuum remain.

—

The enormous silent television.

—

His wife's collection of porcelain clowns, all frowning.

—

The box fan, its blades
unmoving.

—

One spring the swifts built their nest in the chimney.
The cries of hatchlings filled the room.

Hung on the wall: the prized wide-mouth bass—

the twist and fight
of his muscled body
preserved.

And the wild desperate eye
lit, fiery, in noon sunlight.

A row of cameras on the shelf
on the wall. His beloved Nikon,

the black lens aimed

toward the window—
the hummingbird dances into the lens
for a drink.

Prayer for a Father

That a hundred hummingbirds will hatch blue—green—ruby from your chest.

That you will pull yourself, legless, up the bright hill of flaming gold grass.

That your mule Honey will come to you on the hill and drink creek water from your chest.

That the dove's blood and white feathers on your hands will lift you from the hill.

That two girls will sing in your chest and you will hold yourself and laugh and laugh.

That you will take a knife, cut off your white whiskers and become young again.

And after, I will know you as a hundred hummingbirds leaving your body leaving the hill.

The Libation Bearers

I stood over your mother's grave with a bowl of honey.
I sang for her, told your secret, and poured her the bowl of honey.

What strange fruit hangs from our trees. They're bitter,
the Furies, they haven't slept. They wait for an offering bowl of honey.

Dust and wind ripped through in the palms this evening.
The soldiers took off their shirts, played cards. Ashes fell into a bowl of honey.

They bury their dead in honey said Herodotus
of the Babylonians. Even the dead ask for their bowl of honey.

At night the deaf girls read Marx in the dormitory. By the window,
with her hands, one asks the moon, that bowl of honey.

Is it true what they say? That you cut the throat
of your best colt, gathered the blood into a bowl of honey?

You had desired someone else's woman.
Her hair wet with summer heat, you fed on a bowl of honey.

I dug through the insides of tree trunks
found the wild bees, the messengers' bowl of honey.

The field of bees are settling on God's flowers.
My wife is with child, her belly a bowl of honey.

A mother in Baghdad quiets her baby with honey on the lips.
All night she dips her fingers in a bowl of honey.

Blood will only bring more blood. The dusty streets are silent.
From the lion carcass Samson found a swarm of bees, a bowl of honey.

You must do it, Alabama, offer honey to your dead.
The gods will forgive then. But only then, after having drunk a bowl of honey.

Self Portrait as an Old Man

Children, waiting by the flood
of azaleas
for the bus, say
See how he walks
like Nosferatu.
I greet them on my morning
constitutional
and they say Please
Nosferatu, make
it rain for us again.
The children gather
under the dogwood
and I reach the branch above,
shake it, and empty yesterday's
rainwater onto them.

Is it April already?

Walking, in my bones
I feel the storm as it approaches.
I take in the air
deeply. I pass
an empty lot, playing
cards are spilt
in the street. A girl
has left her hula hoop
in the street again.
When I was young
my mother said, It's time
you made a name for yourself.

On my land, nothing
has been cultivated. I love
just to watch how wild.
After a good hard rain
I'll plow my arm
into the red mud gut
of the land, feel
how far I can reach.

Is it April again?

The men have returned
from dove hunting,
they left two birds
at my door step, the fallen
necks delicate
as a swoon. The constant
black eyes observing
my approach.

Young Woman with Antlers
Scenes from a Sexual Memoir

[The Early Years]

I tore myself out of my mother's womb.
There was no other way to arrive in this world.
Deviant. This is what the doctors called me at birth.

Before she died, my mother made her sister promise
never to saw off my crown of antlers.

My aunt took me to her home in the north
part of the county, high at the end of a mountain road.
As a girl I spent my evenings by the fire,
seated on the floor while she read to me
the Greek myths.
"So that you will not feel so alone," she said.
She read in a low voice while the fire roared
behind me, and occasionally paused
to rest her eyes on the wall of shadows
cast by my antlers. The shadows—enormous—
danced in the room like the branches a tree.

*

Even with my crown, my aunt laced me up
in dresses. She hung the wash from my head
on hot days when I sat out in the sun to read.
She had a ballet teacher—a friend of hers from town—
give me lessons.

"Watch," the teacher said. "And do as I do."
I was shown how lift my arm to the ceiling
and call it *grace*.
She taught me the split leap—"As if you were fleeing," she said.
"No," I said. "No—
teach me to go like an arrow."

*

Something in my aunt had changed toward me
when she knew I would not shed
my crown with the seasons as the whitetails did.

“But I am not a whitetail,” I said.

*

I was seven when my aunt destroyed all the mirrors
in our house.

“Look at you,” she said, “admiring
yourself. More than is natural
for a girl.”

Yet, every year for my birthday she tied my crown
with bright ribbons of all
colors imaginable
and drove me to the lake
where I could kneel from the bank
and see myself.

The Peacocks

Scene 1: The bride. The dead. The bowl of fruit.

(As recounted by the guests.)

The dead ruined Louisa's wedding.
They came for the exotic figs
spilling from a bowl
into violent wind.

The East wind spitting the wedding dress
onto the lawn.

*

The priests still sob at the churchyard.
A blackbird above cuts its shadow across their faces.
The priests throw off their socks on the graves, their feet damp from the heat.
It's unwritten in the scriptures – what happened with the dead that day.
The priests see snakes in the grass.

*

Yes, yes but it had been a big spring. The cicadas
abandoned their busted out shells
all over the wet green hills.
The wedding guests crushed
the shells into the hot afternoon
with their shoes.
Louisa's father shaved that day,
straining to see the landscape, his
dull eyes looked like they'd been stung
by bees. Blind man, a retired art critic,
and his daughter in white.
Blind man, beneath the boiling sun, reaching
to feel his daughter's face,

he could smell the wet night on her shoulders.

*

Tell me. Tell me again

about Louisa's wedding and the dead.
Was it like in the picture show –
did they groan, lifting
their faces from the graves?
Were the eyes decayed?
Did their flesh smell
of Jesus's loneliness?
*

I believe the Lord's hands
were in the event.
The whole thing smelt
of Christ's hands – His
mysterious doings.

*

I believe the event was unrelated to the wedding.
Louisa's face is too uneventful to stir the dead.

*

And how bold was Louisa's mother!
Renting those Wife-of-the-Devil birds—
the damn blue and gold, green and gold feathers—
thinking themselves better than our men,
flirting at all the wives, pushing
through the wedding guests as if
they had pearls round their necks.

*

The peacocks nearly shook off their black skins
dancing and hollering,
slinging saliva on the ground, their irreligious screams
made the priest grasp at his bowels.

*

Let me tell it. It was rainy.
Everyone dressed for the wedding.
We had come from an afternoon meal.
A small wedding.
A hillside church – eleven graves beneath a fig tree.

It was a muddy wind out.
From the yellow rain we couldn't
see much. We saw mud.
Guests murmuring. The wind
and mud didn't bother anyone.
The women – we took off our heels.
Our ankles sank
in the mud. The wedding cloth
was not ruined. Father Fallon yelled
above the rain and trees and Louisa's thick hair
to read the scripture – and they emerged,
the dead. Were pulled out
of the muddy ground.
Oh Debra, the unwashed bones,
and those birds
trembling their eyes up at God
their frenzy and indignation.
The stench of their tongues
reaching for the sun.

Scene 2: Alberto, the police chief.

We pulled our guns out
upon arrival.

What I have gathered is this:

the strong East wind
tore the fig tree down, unearthed
the dead.

*A thing is never separable
from its relation to the world.*

We shot the peacocks, but their eyes
still pulsed,
the filmy black pupils recorded
the scene:

the hills, the hot merciless sun.

Scene 3: The peacocks, dancing, tell it as it really happened.

we see it
the big boiling sun

and we dance

we see the bride
she too
boils

we see the father
with no eyes
look at the sun

the sound of bells
washes
the landscape

we feel the dead beneath
the boiling sun

the dead feel the figs
agonizing
in a red bowl